

COMMENTARY: THE PROMISE OF DIGITAL SCHOLARSHIP IN SLA RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

Sally Sieloff Magnan

University of Wisconsin, Madison

Although digital scholarship is now well established in academia, there is no consensus about how it should be evaluated for tenure and promotion. Is digital publication acceptable as a way to disseminate research? Is the digital medium appropriate for conducting research? To what degree does creating digital materials--from research instruments to pedagogical materials--advance knowledge and thereby constitute scholarship? Recent calls for open access to scholarship (i.e., free publication and dissemination) through digital media (see [Chanier, 2007](#)) are stimulating a debate that hinges on just such questions. In that debate, departments holding traditional views hesitate to recognize digital media as scholarship while others hold that digital media promises to enrich scholarly exchanges.

In 2001, the Modern Language Association entered the controversy by offering its Guidelines for Evaluating Work with Digital Media in the Modern Languages (MLA, 2001). These Guidelines are the work of the Committee on Information Technology, formerly the MLA Committee on Computers and Emerging Technologies in Teaching and Research. They aim to help departments achieve an informed perspective on this new scholarly medium. In this commentary, I offer additional thoughts to the debate by considering (a) how digital media necessitates a redefinition of scholarship in second language acquisition (SLA) research and language pedagogy, (b) what criteria might be used in evaluating digital scholarship, and (c) how digital media enhances and accelerates SLA scholarship beyond the possibilities of print publication.

Redefining Scholarship

The MLA Guidelines broaden the notion of text to consider research presented in digital form, in addition to research published in print. Digital texts often include images and sounds as well as words. They open new venues for scholarly exchange, which push the borders of scholarship. Blogs, bulletin boards, and listservs are now the site of considerable academic discussion, replacing to some extent the function of editorials and responses or comments in scholarly journals, which appear less frequently than in years past.

In addition to expanding the parameters of what constitutes scholarship, the MLA Guidelines also redefine authorial roles and the notion of ownership by recognizing and supporting collaboration in interdisciplinary teams involving technical experts. This allowance for collaborative authorship moves the professional one step farther from its heavy reliance on the single-authored monograph as the gold standard route up the academic ladder (MLA, 2006). In SLA research, we have relied on co-authorship for some time now. For example, in *The Modern Language Journal*, which I edited for 14 years, it is now more common to find co-authors or multiple-author teams than it is to find articles by single authors. This trend developed steadily over my editorship, in line with the growing interdisciplinary nature of research. Co-authors often include teams of established scholars and young scholars or graduate students, along with statisticians, who provide technical expertise in handling the research data. In a parallel fashion, it would seem highly appropriate in digital scholarship to expect authorship teams to include co-authors who provide technical expertise.

For language teaching materials, co-authorship is even more common than in SLA research. Major textbooks have many components, the majority of which are now digital (e.g., websites, electronic workbooks, companion electronic textbooks, interactive exercises, guided chat rooms, and blogs.). As a textbook co-author, *Paroles* from Wiley (Magnan, Martin-Berg, Berg, & Ozzello, 2006), I can attest to

the dangers of having technology authors from outside the field prepare these materials without input from the main authors of the text. Authors need as much or more expertise in SLA to prepare digital materials--with their rich interlacing of print, visual, and aural material--than even to create the print textbook. Materials need to be selected and sequenced according to principles of second language learning, which relates them to SLA research. In fact, as Swaffar and Arens (2005) point out, the multimodes of digital materials reflect the multimodes of language learning. The social turn in SLA research leads us to believe that languages are best learned by a combination of talking, hearing, reading, and writing, that is, through all types of interactions inherent with involvement in social communities (cf., Hall, 2001, for example). It would be counter-intuitive to restrict pedagogical materials to a single mode of communication. Digital materials are needed, in addition to print materials.

Over 20 years ago the American Association of University Supervisors, Coordinators, and Directors of Foreign Language Programs (AAUSC) issued a statement urging institutions to value language textbooks in the scholarly dossiers of SLA researchers. This recommendation appears also in the 2006 MLA Task Force report. It is no longer unusual for a department to include textbook authorship as a substantial part of a dossier for tenure and promotion. It is a logical and necessary step to include digital pedagogical materials as well.

Evaluating Digital Scholarship

As the MLA Guidelines rightly point out, the criteria for evaluating digital scholarship must center on academic peer review. This process helps separate out quick listserv or blog postings from more carefully crafted and vetted remarks. Peer review is required for publication in many digital venues, including *Language Learning & Technology*; in terms of scholarly value, these venues should be treated no differently from referred print publication. In fact, might we not attribute more academic value to a peer reviewed contribution in an online journal than to a monograph published by a vanity press? The MLA has recognized the declining number of outlets for publishing scholarly books, which led the organization to urge departments to rethink the dominance of the monograph, to promote scholarly essays and portfolios, and to recognize the legitimacy of scholarship produced in new media (MLA, 2006). The rigor of the selection process is more important in determining the merit of a publication than its physical nature.

Given that co-authorship is becoming the norm, it is important to understand the contributions of each author to the final publication. This information should be made available to academic promotion committees; perhaps it should also appear with each publication in a brief note.

Another criterion for determining scholarly worth is contribution to the profession. To estimate the impact of an author's work, departments have traditionally relied on reviews of a monograph and on circulation and acceptance rates of journals. With digital media, the task is much easier. For web sites, the number of hits is a common measure. For electronic journal publication, editors receive information on how many times each article has been downloaded; in principle, these figures could be made available to authors. Digital databases track citations and use them to determine impact factors of journals, which many presses consider more reliable measures of readership than circulation figures. It is true that print circulation is declining as libraries enter consortia to purchase large numbers of journals, offering them online to library users, who often access them from home. Through such consortia arrangements, the number of readers increases dramatically. For example, in 2004, Blackwell Publishing estimated digital access for *The Modern Language Journal* at over 135,000 readers (Magnan, 2006), whereas print copies of the journals numbered under 5,000.

Given the greater academic reach of digital media, it is logical to consider its contribution to the profession as equal to--or actually greater than--that of print publication. The journal *Language Teaching* is looking to publish some conference papers as podcasts to make them available sooner than would be possible in print. We are likely in the future to see the scholarly monograph disseminated in PDF format.

Swiftness and cost of publication drive this innovation. Will disciplines remain open to such changing measures of academic value while keeping standards strong?

Chanier (2007) pointed to a journal's impact factor as a way to measure the stature of a publication. Impact factors are not well understood and are relatively easy to manipulate. An impact factor for a journal considers the number of citations appearing in the literature from a journal in proportion to the number of articles the journal has published that year. This number is ranked relative to the counts for other journals. The more citations there are over a fixed period of time, the higher the impact factor. In this system, one article that is widely cited drives up the impact factor. Editors are thus encouraged by their publishers to include survey and state-of-the-art papers, which will be cited in all future articles addressing the topic, as well as to publish special issues early in the volume year to give them time to be cited extensively. If the impact factor is to become a primary criterion for evaluating scholarly work, authors, like editors, will learn to manipulate it by shaping the type of work they produce and when they schedule it to appear. The impact factor is thus not as impartial as a blind peer review, although it does involve the profession as a whole rather than a few individual scholars.

It is important to separate the medium of presentation--digital or print--from the selection criteria. The peer review process should be the gold standard, not the medium in which the publication appears.

Enhancing and Accelerating Research

The MLA has recognized the growing demands placed on candidates for tenure with over 62% of departments surveyed reporting increased requirements for publication over the past 10 years (MLA, 2006). How does digital scholarship help researchers accelerate publication? Databases and electronic access facilitate the discovery of previous studies. In addition to easy access, the archiving function of databases provides durability for published research. These databases are growing rapidly. For example, the total amount of access to JSTOR increased by 47% from June 2006 to June 2007, during which time 134 journals were added to its archive (JSTOR, 2007). Because they are easily used and retrieve material quickly, digital databases help young researchers meet the increasing demands for publication.

There is an additional value to digital publication: the seemingly unlimited space it allows researchers to develop concepts and to include research instruments and even data sets. For replication studies, it is important to have access to this material. Sharing research tools also fosters collaborative endeavors and quickens the pace of obtaining new knowledge.

Because of the ease of access and use, digital scholarship should facilitate, and thereby accelerate, research. If the increasing demands for publication in the tenure and promotion process are intended to further the field, then the tools that foster them should be accepted and welcomed. It would be unfortunately ironic to devalue the very media that is needed to create and disseminate knowledge in today's digital age. Broadening our notion of scholarship to value digital research on a par with print publication would enrich the field.

It would also facilitate research on the digital media itself. In terms of language learning, questions should be asked about how languages are learned and how people interact in them online, as well as about how meaning and thought are mediated across cultures in digital venues. The digital environment is quickly becoming a major site for learner interaction with other language communities, through both written and oral communication. We need to understand that environment in order to understand its effect on the language learning process. What better way to enhance our understanding than to immerse ourselves in digital media: to research how meaning is made and communicated digitally as we also use digital venues to disseminate our research findings.

Already six years old, the MLA Guidelines remain poised to have a substantial impact on the field through their effort to encourage digital publication. They are strengthened by the 2006 MLA Task Force report on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion. Both reports leave, however, much

interpretation to individual scholars, who are encouraged to document and explain the intellectual rigor of their work, as well as to departments, which are encouraged to communicate in writing how evaluation of digital work will be done. I offer these comments to those individual scholars and departments as further thoughts when preparing this important documentation. To realize the promise of digital scholarship, SLA researchers and pedagogues, and the departments that house them, need the academic freedom both to pursue and to disseminate new knowledge in this new forum, which offers great potential for accelerating the discovery and dissemination of knowledge.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sally Sieloff Magnan, University of Wisconsin-Madison, is the Editor of *The Modern Language Journal* (1994-2007). She is also a Professor of French, Co-director of the Doctoral Program in Second Language Acquisition, and Director of both the UW-Madison Language Institute and Centre de Ressources. She has published widely, most recently on language learning during study abroad and on communicative approaches to language teaching. Her co-authored textbook *Paroles* (Wiley, 2006) is in its third edition.

Email: ssmagnan@wisc.edu

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